# The Girl Who Was Too White

## A HAWAIIAN TALE

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The scent of carnations will always bring it back to me, I think, or the distant sound of the sea. I shall see it all as I saw it then—the long sweep of the waves rolling in from the Pacific, the wild curve of the shore, the tall palms silhouetted against the star-strewn sky. I shall feel again the soft touch of the tropic breeze on my cheek, hear the long roar of the breakers tumbling over the coral reef. And there will arise within me, as there does now, the old, wild longing to go back to it all, to feel again the mystery of the land, to listen to its legends.

And I shall see once more the woman, crouched on the beach, letting grains of sand slip softly through her fingers, speaking in that quiet, emotionless voice of emotions beyond all comprehension. It was carnations she wore that night.

When I first knew her, she was one of those retiring little girls, painfully modest, self-conscious to the degree of wretchedness, pretty in a quiet, subdued sort of way. Her mother was a big, florid woman with ideas, an aggressive air and the frequently voiced belief that she was a most devoted mother. She watched Annis as if she thought the girl were not to be trusted, and Annis showed all the symptoms of having too much mother. She was never given the opportunity to think or act for herself. Just the kind of girl, you know, who is handed over to some maternally chosen husband, and finishes out her existence in the same spiritless, dependent way she began it.

I suppose Annis would have fulfilled her manifest destiny if she hadn't met Jack Holloway. Jack had a way with him. You know the kind—big, hearty, a good mixer with the men, and immensely independent, but withal very deferential and respectful toward the women. Even those who had most cause to hate him could not but feel the charm of his manner.

And there were plenty of women who had cause to hate him. Some way, though, they never did. Jack could forget easily enough. They couldn't.

Jack had a record behind him—a pretty bad one. He was one of the kind that the boys are always glad to see and be with, but whom they don't care about introducing to their sisters.

How he ever came to fall in love with Annis Rayner has always been a mystery to me. When I first saw him beginning to take some notice of her I thought it was an infernal shame. I was rather minded to go to him and appeal to his sense of the eternal fitness of things for him to keep away from her. But that is one of the things a man is pretty reluctant to do.

And besides, there was something in his attitude toward her, I don't know exactly what, that seemed different from the way he treated most girls. There was a certain air of protection in the way he used to hover about her, especially when he did not think he was being observed. And once or twice I caught a look in his eyes as he glanced at her that impressed me peculiarly. It seemed to be rather a compound of tenderness and pain, a strange, half-puzzled look, as if he had discovered something, in her or in himself, I couldn't make out which, that he could not understand.

Just why it was I don't know yet, but there was something that made me leave matters to adjust themselves.

And then Jack disappeared.

He didn't say much about it to any of the boys. Just came around one night and told some of us he was going away next morning. Didn't say where, any more than that it was on one of the periodic wanderings that he had been in the habit of going on for years.

But I had hardly thought of his going off in that way just then. I thought that perhaps, after all, he and Annis—well, anyway, he went.

I didn't see Annis for some time after Jack went away. When I did see her, I was startled. There was some strange, new look about her that I didn't like. Some way she seemed to have lost her air of dependence, helplessness, the habit of waiting for someone to tell her what to do.

Not that she did anything different from what she used to do. Her mother still treated her in the way she always had, as if the girl were a being of a lower order of intelligence than herself. And Annis still moved as her masterful mother directed. But some way there did not seem to be that peculiar air of meekness, of lack of volition. She moved as she was directed, but the movement seemed to come from within, as if she herself were the directing spirit.

There wasn't anything that the most exacting could have taken exception to. Probably no one else noticed any change. But I had been watching the girl pretty closely for some time, because I had become interested in the outcome of the affair. And I didn't like the change. I had that strange feeling that one has sometimes just before a thunderstrom—a sort of nervous feeling, a presentiment that something is going to happen.

Something did happen. Annis disappeared.

She didn't say anything to anybody and she didn't leave any trace. She just dropped out of existence, apparently. No word ever came back to the town from her or about her. Her mother was almost insane—for a week or two. She got over it soon, though—got ideas about new things and busied herself trying to impress them on other people.

I had my suspicions for a while. But when Jack Holloway returned from somewhere over in Asia—Thibet or Persia or Turkestan, I don't remember just where—and heard about Annis, it only needed one look at his face to tell me that he had had nothing to do with it. He stayed around a week or so, looking like a man condemned to torment, and then he disappeared again. He told me, though, the night before he left, that he was going to look for Annis. Said he would find her if she were alive and he lived long enough.

It was down at a little place called Kapoho, on the east coast of the island of Hawaii, that I found Annis. That was four years later. I had dropped off a steamer at Honolulu on my way back from a trip through Japan and decided to go down to Hawaii and take a look at the volcano of Kilauea. I found after that that I had a week to spare, so I decided to put it in traveling about the island.

I got into Kapoho late one afternoon and met there a chap I had known at college. He was managing a big sugar plantation back a few miles from the coast.

After a few drinks and the customary exchange of news about people we both knew, he asked me how I would like to take in a luau that night. "Better come along," he said. "I'll guarantee you a surprise. You will meet the prettiest woman in the islands. She's a mystery to me, which makes her all the more interesting."

We went that evening. Rode up to the place where the luau was being given about 8 o'clock. Maybe you know what that kind of thing is like—pig roasted in a hole in the ground; poi and gin mostly. This particular luau was a little more conventional than the ordinary. A table was used instead of the guests sitting on the ground, as is customary among the natives. The place was sort of half covered with a dried grass thatch, but open at the sides so one could catch glimpses of the stars and of the palms waving in the breeze. And you could hear the rustle of the banana leaves, so exactly like rain that one can hardly persuade himself that it is not raining, even when he looks out and sees an absolutely clear sky overhead.

There were about forty guests seated at the luau table when we went in. The men, dark and many of them extraordinarily good looking, were dressed much as men in other places, except that each one wore about his neck a lei, or wreath of flowers, that somehow became them wonderfully. There were a number of women present, almost as many as there were men, I think. Some of the younger ones, especially the hapahaoles, or half-whites, were very pretty, but the old women were big and gross for the most part, dressed in the holoku, that so effectually hides any beauty of form that they may have, and like the men, wearing leis of flowers about their necks, with other leis about their heads or with flowers stuck in their hair.

The company bid us aloha, and without much ceremony a place was found for us and we sat down. I, of course, could not understand the language, and as Harmon and I were the only haoles (white men) present, I had plenty of time to look about me without having to talk.

It was all interesting enough to me, as a stranger, and I was so absorbed in watching the people that at first I did not notice the entrance of a new guest. Then I looked up and saw her standing in the entrance.

It was Annis. She was dressed in a holoku, which on her became the most graceful garment in the world. A carnation lei hung about her neck and down to her waist, and some strange, waxy, white flower was in her hair, just over one ear. Her soft, brown hair, fluffy and a little tumbled by the wind, shown softly in the light of the flickering torches. Light and graceful she stood there, seeming to sway with the moving shadows of the windblown light behind her, regarding the company silently and familiarly. She was so different from all the rest, and yet so seemingly in place. Her appearance surprised no one, apparently. Each one looked up as she passed and greeted her. "Aloha," she responded, as she moved glidingly along the earthen floor to a place opposite me.

Whether she had seen me before or not I can't say. But when she looked up and saw me staring at her she showed no surprise. It might have been the most natural thing in the world for us two to meet in that place, five thousand miles from the little inland town where we had grown up together. She greeted me with the native salutation as calmly and unconcernedly as if she had seen me yesterday. Then she turned to the man at her side and began to talk to him in the native tongue.

It was all so preposterously strange. She might have been dining in her own home, or at that of one of her friends back in the little Kansas town. Someway I couldn't believe it. I half expected to wake up from the dream and wonder how I came to imagine it all. Yet that was undoubtedly Annis Rayner, the submissive dutiful daughter of her emphatic mother. This girl—woman, rather—opposite me, eating poi with her fingers, talking familiarly in a tongue I could not understand to a swarthy Hawaiian, in a grass-thatched hut in a little seaport town on the island of Hawaii! It isn't such a big world, of course, but yet—

Can you imagine anything more utterly impossible? I took a big drink of gin and tried to understand it all.

The girl didn't speak to me again during the rest of the time we sat there. After the feasting was over, half a dozen native girls came in and danced the hula, to the accompaniment of the monotonous thumping of a calabash by a wrinkled old man, who sang weird phrases in a dreary, mournful chant.

At length the dancers stopped. Some one played a guitar and an ukulele added its strains, and several of the men began to sing one of the weird, haunting Hawaiian melodies—one of those native songs that are unlike the music of any other race in the world, that carry with them always a strain of sadness, like the sadness of the ages, tender, throbbing, the cry of one striving for some unattainable, unknown goal. From one to another of these half-wild, strange songs they passed, and at last came Aloha Oe, the most beautiful, most haunting of them all.

The music stopped. The guests were leaving. I looked about for Annis. She had disappeared.

I was standing outside a few minutes later waiting for Harmon, who was talking to some of the men inside, when some one touched me on the arm. I turned and saw the woman.

"Come," she said. "I want to talk to you."

I followed her down to the beach, about a quarter of a mile away. She moved ahead without speaking, flitting along through the starlight like some impalpable shadow.

We reached the water and she sat down on the sand and motioned me to a place beside her. For a while she didn't speak. Something seemed to hold us both. There was so much to say, so much to explain.

I can see it all now—that tropic night scene. One bright star, Venus it was, I think, was sinking into the sea and cast a long trail of yellow light across the water. Out in the distance was the white foam of the breakers, half seen in the dim light, seeming always to approach yet never reaching the shore. The sound of the roaring came to us across the distance, steady, sonorous, masterful, expressive of might, of eternity of duration, of infinitude of strength.

In shore, wavelets babbled along the sand, rushing up in playful dashes, then falling back, strangely like a kitten at play. I picked up a pebble and threw it into the water. The effort seemed puerile, feeble, in the face of that unspeakable mass of sea that by its own weight seemed to squeeze the land up out of it. Behind us the land was dark and silent. There was no sound of bird or insect, nothing but the drone of the breakers and the foolish splashing of the wavelets.

She told me the story without preface, without interruption. She didn't seem to be telling me. It was more as if she was thinking aloud. Sometimes she would stop for minutes together and the silence would hang about us, weighty, oppressive, charged with the dim wonder of that land. It was almost a physical effort to speak again, as if to do so one must force back that weight.

It was the story of a woman's love, of a sacrifice incredible, preprosterous. If I had not heard it there, under those strange circumstances, I would not have believed it. But I knew the woman was speaking the truth.

She had love Jack Holloway with a love greater than woman's. Perhaps it was her dreary, repressed life that made it all the greater. Nothing, you see, had ever come into her life to make it more than mere existence until he came. That changed it all. For her there was nothing else in the universe. He was God to her, and Love, and all that means most to a woman. She gave herself to him absolutely. That he took nothing but her love was because he asked nothing more. And because she gave so much, she got as much in return. He treated her as he had treated no woman in all his wild, careless life. He loved her only less than she loved him. It is strange that a man like him should have been capable of it all. Yet because she was so much to him he would not take her.

"Ay," she said, "I offered him all in the world. I forgot I was a woman, forgot I had never acted for myself, that I had been spiritless, without thought or feeling of my own. I knew he loved me. Yet he would not say so. So I told him. I found words that no woman had ever found before. What they were I don't know now. But when I finished he stood a moment as if he were without life. His muscles were contracted. His face was drawn and white as the face of the dead. But his arms remained closed. He spoke from lips that were hard and stiff. He loved me, he said, loved me too much to marry me. I was too good for him. It would be an insult to my love, to my womanhood, to offer me the love of a man like him, a man who had lived as he had lived, done as he had done.

"And so he left me.

"I was too good for him, he said. I, who thought of nothing else but him, whose dreams were of him, whose God was he. I was too good for him!"

The rest is incredible. Can you imagine it—a woman trying to kill the good that is in her, to smirch her name, drag herself in the mire of the world, make herself a by-word and a reproach to those who knew her—so that she might sink low enough for the man she loved to be worthy of her?

But that is what she tried to do. And she couldn't. She told me, in fragmentary sentences. There was something in her that would not let her. Appearances mattered nothing. She didn't care for them. But the actual sinning against herself—that she could not do.

I don't know where she had been. Many cities, in all parts of the world. How she had lived I don't know. It doesn't matter. She had been loved much and by many men, but she cared nothing for any of them. She tried, tried desperately, to make herself the thing she would be, to descend low enough in the scale of womanhood to make herself a fit mate, as she thought, for the man she loved. She could not. That something in her that is in all of us to a greater or less degree, call it decency if you will, or what you will, always held her back.

"I am not bad," she said, and she said it as if it were a tragedy, something terrible, some frightful moral disease. "I am not bad, I can't be bad."

It was all so weird. I felt almost that I should encourage the woman—urge her to go on, use those platitudes that we use in encouraging a faltering fellow-being to be good—only platitudes inverted.

I hardly heard how she came to be in that place, among that little more than half-civilized people. I don't know that it matters much. I remember fragments of sentences—something about her being a nurse in the Russian war, of a chance meeting with Jack Holloway in China, where he did not recognize her, of his starting for the Hawaiian Islands. She resisted, it seems, as long as she could, and then followed him. She didn't find him. He was somewhere in that part of the world, and she heard that he intended to come back to the Islands again, so she waited, was still waiting, had been for a year. Perhaps it was the weariness of the past three years, perhaps partly the soothing peacefulness of the climate, of the soft breezes, the heavy odors of the flowers, that had made her willing to stay there and wait, still trying in her mind to kill the good that was in her. It was a moral struggle, you see, not a struggle of deeds.

Of course, I recognized the preposterousness of the position, the wrong-sightedness of the woman—urged her to give it up, to come back with me. I did it half-heartedly. I knew it was useless. Besides, I think I was partly under the spell myself—the heavy night air, the far stars, the hypnotic droning of the breakers out on the coral reef, the smell of the land behind us. It was an effort to speak. One hardly knew, even, that he heard.

I left her there, sitting on the beach, a little bent over, letting a thin stream of sand run from her hand onto the ground. The carnation lei hung about her neck like a crimson cord, almost black in the darkness. The odor of the flower in the air seemed to hang over her like a material substance.

I never saw her again. They found her there the next morning. Harmon wrote me about it; I got the letter after I had returned to San Francisco. He said she looked very happy and very beautiful as she lay there with the light breeze caressing her hair. And the carnation lei was so fresh and red that one hardly noticed that the white dress was also red in one spot.

### THE WORST EXPERIENCE.

"At what degree did you find your journey most difficult?"

"It was all plain sailing," answered the arctic explorer, "until I got home and struck the 'third degree.'"

They were drinking soda in the Gentlewoman's club. "I wish," said the fat one with gray hair, "that you could break my daughter Nell of bridge." The young one in pink smiled faintly. "I did break her last night," she said. —Brooklyn Citizen.